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"Queens Love Revenge as Well as Their Subjects": Unity in The Heart of Mid-Lothian

Frances M. Clements
University of Wisconsin, Green Bay

FRANCES M. CLEMENTS

"Queens Love Revenge as Well as Their Subjects": Thematic Unity in *The Heart of Mid-Lothian*

Though generally acknowledged as Sir Walter Scott's masterpiece, *The Heart of Mid-Lothian* has seldom received unqualified critical approval.[1] While most objections center around Book IV, characterized by such epithets as the "disastrous conclusion" or the "prolonged, disparate, and largely irrelevant coda,"[2] other parts have also had their detractors. Robin Mayhead, for example, objects to Book III as well as Book IV, and is particularly severe on Madge Wildfire, because "she has little or nothing to do with the governing theme which gives [the] first half, in spite of defects, its overall unity and distinction." Even in this distinguished first half, he finds the gothic treatment of George Robertson/Staunton, Effie's seducer, an intrusive sop to popular taste.[3] David Craig disallows even Mayhead's truncated version and will grant artistic unity only to Chapters 9-19, dealing with "the moral and religious ethos produced by Presbyterianism" in the years after 1688.[4]

The burden of these remarks, representing 150 years of critical comment, is that the novel as a whole lacks thematic unity. However, one possible way to meet these objections and to bestow thematic relevance on the parts thus criticized, including the Porteous riot, Books III and IV, George Staunton, and the Madge Wildfire group, is to see the novel as a dramatization of the theme of revenge, the harm

1. For a survey of critical opinion up to 1936, see James T. Hillhouse, *The Waverley Novels and Their Critics* (1936; rpt. New York: Octagon Books, 1970). Selected critical articles and reviews until 1885 appear in John O. Hayden, *Scott: The Critical Heritage* (New York: Barnes and Nobles, 1970).

2. Robert C. Gordon, *Under Which King? A Study of the Scottish Waverley Novels* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1969), p. 85, and John Henry Raleigh, "Editor's Introduction," *The Heart of Mid-Lothian* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1966), p. ix.

3. Robin Mayhead, "*The Heart of Midlothian*: Scott as Artist," *Essays in Criticism*, VI (1956), 277 and 267. Mayhead has since stated that he no longer holds this "extreme view." See "Scott and the Idea of Justice" in *Scott's Mind and Art*, ed. A. Norman Jeffares (New York: Barnes and Nob'e, 1970), p. 168.

4. David Craig, "*The Heart of Midlothian*: Its Religious Basis," *Essays in Criticism*, VIII (1958), 217.

it does, and the necessity for achieving some alternative mode of action. Evil in the novel results from someone's desire for vengeance, while any good there may be occurs because a character can forgive those who have harmed him or, at least, can live and let live. David Daiches comes close to this interpretation in his discussion of *The Heart of Mid-Lothian* as a novel unified by "the problem of heroic action in an unheroic civilization," though even he finds a weakness in "the band of underworld figures who circle around Madge Wildfire," and regrets that the novel did not end "soon after Jeanie's return from London."[5] But what is heroic action? At least one important manifestation of it, as seen in Homer, in *Beowulf,* or in the Icelandic sagas, is the quest for revenge. The frequency in *The Heart of Mid-Lothian* of words like resentment, revenge, reprisal, retaliation, and vengeance indicates that this aspect of heroic action plays as important a part in Scott's novel as it does in the literature of the heroic age.

The story begins with a series of events leading to the Porteous riot — each event motivated by someone's desire for vengeance. The riot's ultimate cause is Dandie Wilson, the smuggler. Having been "totally ruined by repeated seizures," Wilson is driven half-mad, to the point where he believes he has "a right to make reprisals" against the government, and he feels "no scruple of conscience" in reimbursing himself for his losses (I. 27-28).[6] Captured, tried, and condemned for his crimes, he is delivered to Captain Porteous for execution.

In turn, Porteous is motivated by revenge in his treatment of his prisoner Wilson. A man of "hot and surly temper, always too ready to come to blows and violence" (I. 38), his natural surliness is exacerbated when a detachment of Welsh Fusileers are sent to Edinburgh to help maintain order, a prudent move given the inordinate public sympathy aroused by Wilson's heroic self-sacrifice during Robertson/Staunton's escape. Resentful of this slur on the abilities of his City Guard and unable to express his resentment to his employers, the city magistrates, Porteous becomes increasingly indignant and increasingly desirous "to be revenged on the unfortuate criminal Wilson" (I.39), hence his cruelty at Wilson's execution. When Wilson's friends rush to cut down his corpse, Captain Porteous is "wrought, by this appearance of insurrection against

5. "Introduction," *The Heart of Midlothian* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969), pp. vii, x, xii. A discussion of heroic action as central to all the Waverley novels can be found in the same author's "Scott's Achievement as a Novelist," *Literary Essays* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1966), pp. 88-122.

6. Citations in my text are to *The Heart of Mid-Lothian,* ed. Andrew Lang, Border Edition, 2 vols. (London: John C. Nimmo, 1893).

his authority, into a rage" (I.42); as a result, the Guard fires into the crowd, and several citizens of Edinburgh are killed.[7]

Now, in their turn, the citizens of Edinburgh desire revenge; as Porteous's execution nears, the public's "thirst of vengeance was in some degree allayed by its supposed certainty," and the populace attends the hanging "prepared to enjoy the scene of retaliation" and "to glut their sight with triumphant revenge" (I.46). The reprieve, of course, brings from them "a roar of indignation and disappointed revenge" (I.49-50).

Deprived of legal means of revenge by the pardon, the citizens form a lynch mob, and again their vengefulness is emphasized. Porteous's friends fear "some scheme of sudden and desperate vengeance" (I.86), and given the state of the popular mind, their fears are justified. Mrs. Howden, one of the choric gossips, expresses the ordinary citizen's desire for revenge when she says, "I'll ne'er believe Scotland is Scotland ony mair, if our kindly Scots sit doun with the affront they hae gien us this day" (I.58), while Robertson, speaking at the foot of the gallows for the more extreme element, tells Reuben Butler that "Blood must have blood" (I.93). The mob itself is composed of men who view "the object of their resentment" with "the most inflexible inveteracy" (I.84). The "vengeance of the people," however, is directed solely against Porteous, for they disdain to harm the city soldiers, though they "had been the instruments of the slaughter which this riot was designed to revenge" (I.79). When the bloody work is finally done, the mob disperses "completely satiated with the vengeance they had prosecuted" (I.98).

Just as vengeance dominated Book I, providing the motive for the major actions — the death of Wilson, the murder of the Edinburgh

7. Raleigh, p. xxvii, makes much of the doubt about Porteous's guilt in firing on the populace. "Has justice been done?" he asks. "We never know. That Porteous was a bad man there can be no doubt. But that he was guilty as charged was never and can never be proved, for the evidence is lost in the hur'y-burly of history." I believe that we, as literary critics, do know, however ambiguous may be the record confronting the historian. Scott — or Peter Pattieson — tells us quite clearly that Porteous "sprung from the scaffold, snatched a musket from one of his soldiers, commanded the party to give fire, and, as several eye-witnesses concurred in swearing, set them the example, by discharging his piece, and shooting a man dead on the spot." As the City Guard withdraws through the crowd, "the rearmost soldiers turned, and again fired with fatal aim and execution. It is not accurately known," continues the narrator, "whether Porteous commanded this second act of violence . . ." (I. 43), but for the reader, as opposed to the novel's characters, doubt exists only about this second act. Any questions about the original shooting arise only later when the magistrates begin to examine the eye-witnesses, and they exist only in the minds of the characters in the novel. The reader knows that Porteous is guilty.

citizens, the attack on the Tolbooth, and the death of Porteous, it also determines Effie's fate in Book II and motivates Jeanie's journey to London. Though Effie is convicted of child-murder, the jury "in consideration of her extreme youth, and the cruel circumstances of her case, did earnestly entreat that the Judge would recommend her to the mercy of the Crown" (I.354). But according to Bartoline Saddletree, such mercy will never be granted, not because the English care a whit how many Scots kill off one another, but because the "king and queen are sae ill pleased wi' that mistak about Porteous, that deil a kindly Scot will they pardon again" (I.360), a judgment reiterated by other characters as well as by the omniscient author. News of Porteous's murder "excited great indignation . . . in the bosom of Queen Caroline," and in London the only topic for some time was "the measure of vengeance which should be taken" (I.98-99), for as Staunton tells Jeanie, "Queens love revenge as well as their subjects" (II.141). Argyle, also, at first sees little hope for a pardon, since "the late disorders in Edinburgh have excited a prejudice in government against the nation at large" (II.165).

Queen Caroline, however, is not the only avenger responsible for Effie's plight; Meg Murdockson's vengefulness, manifested in her refusal to reveal the fate of Effie's baby, is the cause of Effie's being tried in the first place. Without her machinations, the child could have been produced alive and well. Thus Effie's failure to reveal her pregnancy would have been irrelevant. In Books III and IV, Scott unravels the tangled skein of vengeance that binds Meg to Staunton and to the Deans family, thus providing much of the thematic unity which critics have so often denied to the last half of the novel and to the Murdockson-Wildfire group of characters. The revenge note is struck on Meg's first introduction when "the termagant, her eye gleaming with impotent fury," threatens to claw the face of a city officer for calling her "other than a gude ane" (I.271). Reacting in a similar fashion to Frank Levitt's epithet of Mother Blood, "the fury [Meg] darted her knife at him with the vengeful dexterity of a wild Indian" (II.67). Unable for sentimental reasons to revenge herself on her nursling Staunton, Meg turns on the innocent Effie, to her mind the usurper of her daughter Madge's rightful place as Staunton's wife. In a melodramatic exchange with Frank Levitt, she threatens to strangle Effie with her own hands, to go to any lengths for "revenge, the sweetest morsel to the mouth that ever was cooked in hell" and "the best reward the devil gives us for our time here and hereafter" (II.79). Until her death Meg retains "a deep and revengeful hatred" against Effie (II.354), and though "occasionally expressing some regret about the child which was

lost," she oftener expressed "sorrow that the mother had not been hanged" (II.378).

In this context a gothic character like George Staunton is quite at home — the revenge motif, after all, nearly defines the gothic novel from Horace Walpole to Daphne du Maurier. Staunton and revenge are firmly associated in the novel from his appearance in Book I wearing the borrowed finery of Madge Wildfire and heading the vengeful mob against the Tolbooth until the disappearance of his son, whose last act was to lead a conspiracy to murder an "inhuman master" in America (II.412), presumably in retaliation for that master's cruelty.

Significantly, Reuben Butler encounters Staunton near the end of Book I in a famous duelling place outside Edinburgh where the local gentry, "idle, haughty, fierce, divided by faction, and addicted to intemperance, . . . lacked neither provocation, nor inclination to resent it when given" (I.153). An appropriate milieu for one who asserts that he is "the devil" (I.158) and whom the narrator likens to "the ruined archangel" (I.160) — whose desire for vengeance, incidentally, led to the fall of man.

This revenge motif, established during Staunton's brief appearances in Books I and II, recurs and dominates the sections devoted to him in the subsequent books. His long conversation with Jeanie at his father's house in Willingham, all too often criticized as digressive and irrelevant, is devoted almost entirely to the subject. He recounts to Jeanie the story of his participation in the Porteous riots, motivated by his thirst for vengeance "doubly due from [his] hand, to whom Wilson had given life and liberty" (II.135), the story of his seduction of Madge Wildfire and the subsequent desire of Meg to wreak "vengeance on the seducer of her daughter" (II.137), and the story of his quarrel with his father over the seduction of Madge. As a result of this quarrel, Staunton turns to crime, driven by his "sense of supposed wrong," his "impotent thirst of vengeance" against his family, and his sense of "how it would sound in the haughty ears of the family of Willingham" that the heir apparent had been hung for the equivalent in their eyes of robbing a hen house (II.132). Such a character merits Jeanie Deans's sorrowful condemnation: "they that thirst for the blood of their enemies have no taste for the well-spring of life" (II.140).

When Staunton re-enters the story in Book IV as Sir George Staunton, revenge still motivates his own acts and the acts of those connected with him. Effie lives in constant fear that she will unwittingly betray her husband's past. "If I bring this disgrace on him," she writes to Jeanie, "he will hate me — he will kill me . . ." (II.330). The price she pays for whatever crimes she may be guilty of is to live in fear of

her husband's retribution. Staunton returns to Scotland to seek his son, and one reason he so earnestly desires that son is to revenge himself against the next heir to Willingham, "whom he suspected of having irritated his friends against him during his absence; and he declared, he would bequeath Willingham and all its lands to an hospital, ere that fetch-and-carry-tell-tale should inherit an acre of it" (II.341). And, finally, vengeance determines his death just as it did his life. Staunton dies because Black Donacha "in pursuit of his old vow of revenge" resolves to rob Reuben in order to "flesh at once his appetite for plunder and revenge" (II.407). In the ensuing fight, Staunton is killed by his own son, a lad of "fierce and vindictive" spirit who responds to a blow or a threat "with oaths and efforts at revenge" (II.406). The boy's one desire, should he escape hanging, is to join Rob Roy or Sergeant More Cameron "and revenge Donacha's death on all and sundry" (II. 410).

Clearly the possibilities for human existence are dismal, indeed, in a world where human beings cannot turn the other cheek. The fruits of vengeance are death and destruction for the innocent as well as the guilty — for Madge Wildfire at the hands of a vengeful English mob as for John Porteous at the hands of a vengeful Edinburgh mob, and any blessings that may materialize in such a world result from the ability of human beings to forgive and forget — a trait embodied in Jeanie Deans, Reuben Butler, the Duke of Argyle, and, paradoxically, in Queen Caroline.

Though the Queen's desire for revenge is one of the chief reasons for Effie's desperate plight, her ability to maintain civil relations with those who have offended her gives Argyle his chance to introduce Jeanie into the royal presence (II.185), a meeting which, of course, results in Effie's pardon. In the justly praised scene between Argyle and Caroline, matters begin badly as each insults the other. Instead of lashing out in retaliation, however, each retains his temper and amicable relations are re-established. The Queen draws first blood with a slur on Scots loyalty, but seeing Argyle's flush of annoyance, gracefully turns her remark into praise for the friendship "of his Grace of Argyle." Argyle, in turn, insults by petitioning a pardon for yet another Scots citizen while memories of the Porteous affair still rankle in the royal bosom. The Queen returns an indignant reply. Argyle, unshaken and uninsulted, stands firm, giving the Queen time to see the danger of "yielding to passion," and to assume a more affable tone (II.191). In such a fashion, Scott implies, the work of the world goes on — in this manner life is saved, not destroyed.

Argyle himself is, of course, an ideal figure for dramatizing the reconciliation of differences. As Duke of Argyle *and* Greenwich, he unites in his own person the ancient enemies England and Scotland. As a loyal subject, his Scots sword is at the command of his English king and his native country, whose interests, he tells the Queen, are the same (II.190). His dukedom of Argyleshire encompasses both highlands and lowlands. There "Gael and Saxons lived upon the best possible terms" (II.295); there "clavering Sassenach" voices join with "skirling Gaelic" ones to call Reuben Butler to the parish church of Knocktarlitie (II.288-89). As a man, he soars "above the petty distinctions of faction" (II.160) when he wishes well to his ancient opponents, the Highlanders (II.226), and unlike the vengeful host that populates the novel, he is "not apt . . . to mind rough answers much" (II.172).

Reuben Butler, like Argyle, reconciles ancient animosities in his own person. A Scots minister in the national church, he is, nevertheless, the grandson of that church's ancient enemy, the English Independent, old Bible Butler. His grandfather's letter, which enables Argyle to repay good with good (instead of the revenger's method of repaying evil with evil) contributes significantly to Effie's pardon. Being only human, he cannot live in complete harmony with David Deans (no one except a Jeanie Deans could), but Reuben always takes measures to conciliate their occasional "polemical skirmishes" (II.321). He is on the whole remarkably slow to take offense at the old man's slurs on his own learning or on his father's and his grandfather's religion. He believes that it is better to "drop out of memory points of division and separation" (II.322), that "the sun shines, and the rain descends, on the just and unjust, and they are placed together in life in circumstances which frequently render intercourse between them indispensable" (I.184). Through his efforts, the parishioners in the little world of Knocktarlitie learn to turn the other cheek. The irate Duncan of Knockdunder, incensed at dilatory workmen, is brought "to forgive them, out of respect to their new minister" (II.296); peace is preserved between David Deans and a drunken Jacobite laird upon "the interference of Butler" (II.344), and Reuben's refusal to allow witch-hunting in his parish (II.334-35) assures that no one in Knocktarlitie will suffer the fate of Madge Wildfire — mortally injured by a vengeful populace "under the belief that she was a sorceress" (II.354).

All in all, Reuben is a fitting consort for Jeanie Deans, a woman capable of human resentment, but quick to forgive both major and minor offenses, and certainly not one to take active revenge. Hurt by Effie's teasing about her suitors Butler and Dumbiedikes, Jeanie returns Effie's repentant sisterly kiss "in token of perfect reconciliation"

(I. 139). Rather than resent Butler's half-formed suspicious of her innocent midnight meeting with Staunton, she takes the blame on herself, feeling "as if she had been unjust to a friend" (I. 208). And despite her momentary indignation at Dumbiedikes's insulting refusal to waste his "substance on other folk's joes," her anger immediately cools, and she forgives him (II. 26-28).

These are minor matters, however, compared to other injuries, deliberate or not, done to her by Effie, Staunton, and Meg Murdockson, against none of whom Jeanie is the least inclined to take revenge. Through Effie's selfish indulgence has ruined the family's good name and effectively prevented her sister's marriage to Butler (in Jeanie's opinion, at any rate), Jeanie's efforts are devoted entirely to saving the misguided sinner. In this she acts in marked contrast to David Deans, hysterical with resentment and crying for the "vile harlot" to be brought before him that he "may kill her with a word and a look." In the worst tradition of the Old Testament and the Scottish Covenanters, he demands "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, life for life, blood for blood" (I.150-51). Similarly with Staunton. Though indignant with this "wicked cause of [her] sister's ruin," Jeanie finds it more fitting to pray God for his forgiveness than to curse him (I. 222), and though she fervently desires never to see him again, she wishes him no harm, declining to denounce Staunton to the authorities, though it would have been "an act of just, and even providential retribution" (II. 149, 154). No more does she harbor malice against her most vicious offender Meg Murdockson, refusing to prosecute her for kidnapping (II. 118) and being physically sickened at the distant view of Meg's execution (II. 231). She sums up her own philosophy when she reminds Argyle that "we shouldna hasten ilk other out o' the world" (II. 166).

Viewed in this fashion, as a novel about the dangers of vengeance and the necessity to live and let live, *The Heart of Mid-Lothian* can be perceived as a structure thematically unified. Books III and IV become necessary elements in Scott's tracing of his theme, the gothic George Staunton finds his appropriate setting, and Meg Murdockson's band of outlaws achieve thematic relevance. An appropriate epigraph for the entire novel might well be the Christian's plea: "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us."

University of Wisconsin-Green Bay